

29 MAR 1971

THE PRESS

Low-Keyed Muckrakers

In challenging existing political magazines, a newcomer has about as much chance of success as a New Leftist taking over *National Review*. The odds against survival are so great that only an editor with a strong, fixed idea, uninhibited by the conventional wisdom of his field, would test them. In little more than two years, the *Washington Monthly*, which offers a unique, pianissimo brand of muckraking, has beaten the odds: it is attracting readers who count in the capital and the advertisers who may soon make it a profitable labor of conviction.

This week the *Monthly* and Fledgling Editor Charles Peters will receive a George Polk award for an article revealing Army-intelligence surveillance of U.S. civilians involved in protests and political activity. The Jan. 1970 article bore other significant fruit: the congressional hearings held before Senator Sam Ervin Jr. (see *THE NATION*). Of perhaps greater long-range importance to the *Monthly's* future is that it is being noticed where it matters. It is mist reading at the White House, on Capitol Hill and elsewhere in the Government. The praise of NBC's John Chancellor, former director of the Voice of America, is typical: "They've done more than the original prospectus. It has impact. There's a lot to read in this town, but I think people spend a little more time than usual with this one."

That prospectus in the *Monthly's* first issue in Feb. 1969 promised readers "to help you understand our system of politics and government, where it breaks down, why it breaks down and what can be done to make it work." To the *Monthly*, no territory is off-limits; it has zeroed in on Congress, lobbyists, governmental agencies, press, labor and management. More often than not, Peters' material is not written by journalists but by those who were or still are Government insiders and veterans of the bureaucratic wars.

The award-winning Army spying story came to Peters in the mail from a former intelligence agent, Christopher Pyle. In March 1969, a former member of the Department of Defense brought in an article on "How the Pentagon Can Save \$9,000,000." Senator Frank Church has lectured Nixon on how to end the Viet Nam War, and a Justice Department lawyer described how political considerations often outweigh legal requirements in the Department of Justice.

Whatever the origin of a story idea, when it reaches print in the *Monthly* it bears the Peters imprint: well-documented, straightforward, calm—and tough.

As his fellow muckraker I.F. Stone comments: "It's a responsible magazine. It doesn't go in for half-assed hysterics." The format fits the approach: the *Monthly* is about the size of *National Geographic* but as deliberately subdued in appearance as the *Geographic* is eye-catching. The magazine's staff of six is talented and young; its co-managing editors, Taylor Branch and John Rothchild, are in their mid-20s, and they write with a forceful combination of personal journalism and disciplined documentation.

On the Left. The *Monthly's* economic health has improved with its editorial strength. Circulation at \$1 a copy is 23,000, and the March issue carries more advertising than ever before, a still modest 9½ out of 67 pages. Peters calculates he will break even in one more year. Meanwhile, he admits that "at times it's been brutal. A couple of times I've been down to the last thousand dollars." When he gets there, Peters hustles more money from backers who share a liberal outlook with him and his staff. His angels include West Virginia's Secretary of State John D. Rockefeller IV and Alfred Clark, heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune. "Ideologically, we're on the left," says Peters. "But not always. There are middle-of-the-road and conservative contributors to the magazine, too." However, Peters admits that no recognized conservative has appeared in the journal. "You won't find James J. Kilpatrick here."

Fund raising is only one of Peters' talents; at 44, he has a varied background that does not include journalism. He has been director of evaluation for the Peace Corps, a practicing lawyer and a member of the West Virginia legislature. His Peace Corps function—calmly stated but unflinching evaluation of agency programs—is the backbone of his magazine's approach. It may have more than a little to do with why attention is being paid to the *Monthly*.